

Review of: Naismith, Rory. (2021). *Early Medieval Britain, c. 500-1000*. Cambridge History of Britain. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. Hardback and Paperback, xvii + 473 pages, 135 boxes, illustrations, maps. ISBN 978-1-108-42444-8 (hardcover), ISBN 978-1-108-44025-7 (paperback).

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Producing informative early medieval history textbooks for students is often difficult due to the lack of narrative sources and the complexity of the extant material. The history of early medieval Britain presents several challenges, especially regarding post-Roman developments, migration and ethnicities, and the creation of kingdoms throughout the period. Rory Naismith has attempted to provide a comprehensive outline of key historical ideas and chronological, cultural, and societal developments from circa 500 AD to 1000 AD. This is the first comprehensive textbook on early medieval Britain, synthesising the histories of early medieval England, Scotland, and Wales for the modern undergraduate student. Like all textbooks, there is of course a balance between the breadth of information and the depth into which each subject is studied. There are three parts to this textbook, defined thematically and within which are several chapters designed to give an overview of the period, the sources, the historical narrative, and social and cultural aspects of the different societies in early medieval Britain. Each chapter ends with discussion points and some key secondary literature, with excerpts of primary sources throughout. The introduction is short, but interesting; it discusses Saint Cathróe of Metz's journey from his home in the Kingdom of Alba (now modern Scotland) through to Ireland and England (p. 2-6). This is a unique way to set up the rest of the book for a student, as Naismith uses Cathróe's journey as a metaphor for the journey that one will take through reading the textbook. The rest of the introduction deals briefly with geography (p. 6-9), terminology (p. 9-10), medievalisms (p. 10-14), and a breakdown of the book (p. 14).

Part I is titled "Conceiving Early Britain" and contains chapters 2) "An Island in the Ocean: The Idea of Britain," 3) "On the Edge of the World: Britain and Europe," 4) "Legend, Myth and History," 5) "Migrations and Peoples," and 6) "Fragments of the Past." These chapters largely cover the creation of the idea of Britain, its relationship with the rest of Europe, medieval constructions on the creation of Britain, ethnicities, and archaeology. Much of the first part situates key early medieval texts like Bede's *Ecclesiastical History* and Gildas' *The Ruin of Britain*. One

interesting thing to note is that Naismith relies on A. M. Sellar's translation of Bede, which while outdated is accessible for students online. From a structural perspective, for a textbook targeted to students this book begins with some of the most difficult concepts in the study of medieval history: there are benefits and drawbacks to this approach. Most undergraduate students will likely be used to the idea that history is a series of key events and dates and thus beginning the book with complex subjects of the idea of Britain and ethnicities could present a difficult learning curve. On the other hand, these concepts underpin more detailed understandings of historical narratives and once students gain a deeper understanding of these ideas then their own analyses of historical events and individuals will then be more complex. It is unfortunate, however, that this section is not as strong as it should be, particularly in its discussion of Britain and the wider world, ethnicity, and terminology. For example, Naismith uses the travels of St Willibald to establish the wider links between Britain, Europe, and North Africa and the Middle East (confusingly referred to as "Islam" and "distant Islam", see p. 65 and 66). While it is important to highlight to students that Britain was not cut off from the wider medieval world, the framing of North Africa and the Middle East as "distant Islam" (without mention of Al-Andalusian Spain here) does not challenge established Eurocentric notions that would be welcome in a modern textbook. Moreover, one key subject on the ties between Western Europe and Asia was conspicuously absent: the Radhanite Jewish traders (BROOK, 2018, 70-72) whose travels into Asia were key for bringing luxury goods into Europe, eventually superseded by Venetian merchants (who do get a brief mention on p. 66). Discussions of ethnicity and race in the early medieval period are always complex and require a great deal of sensitivity and nuance. Naismith correctly asserts that ethnicity was fluid and changing and used to serve different needs as required (p. 103). Nevertheless, more specific discussions regarding ethnicity and terminology of the inhabitants of Britain would have benefitted from more careful consideration. Naismith dedicates a lengthy subsection (p. 111-117) on the term "Anglo-Saxon" and although he rightly notes that this term has a wider historical use as an early modern and modern racist and bioessentialist term (p. 112-115), he argues that it no longer has those connotations but rather the terms "England" and "English" are now often employed in extremist language (p. 116). He notes that scholars like himself continue to use "Anglo-Saxon" for its historical context, despite of course its limited early

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medieval use and only within a Wessex context and that "others are uncomfortable with its tainted modern heritage, especially as medieval studies seek [s] to become more approachable and cosmopolitan (p. 117)." A modern textbook for students approaching medieval studies would certainly benefit from this latter perspective. Moreover, despite Naismith's criticisms of the term "England" and "English", he frequently uses it as a clear synonym for "Anglo-Saxon," (see for instance p. 25, 57, 105) which may be confusing for a student new to this topic attempting to gain a clearer understanding of medieval terminology. Certain articles that deal with this topic of "Anglo-Saxon" and medieval constructions of race and ethnicity are absent from his "key texts", such as Susan Reynolds' "What Do We Mean by 'Anglo-Saxon' and 'Anglo-Saxons'?" (1985), Matthew X. Verner's *The Black Middle Ages*, and David Wilton's "What Do We Mean by Anglo-Saxon? Pre-Conquest to Present" (2020). Inclusions of these works would benefit many new students to medieval studies, particularly as the field becomes more diverse and inclusive.

Part II "Making Early Medieval Britain" is perhaps the strongest section of the book, with a detailed yet concise overview of the narrative history of Britain from circa 500 to 1000. With four chapters dedicated to different eras, 7) "Britain c. 500," 8) "'Fertile of Tyrants': Britain 500-650," 9) "'What the Outcome Will Be, a Future Age will see': Britain 650-850," and 10) "'God Help Us!': Britain 850-1000." These sections, arranged chronologically, place different emphases on different kingdoms although largely the narrative focusses on Mercia, Northumbria, and Wessex, with discussions of North Britain (Dál Riata, Pictland, and Alba) and the Welsh kingdoms. For the students whose backgrounds lie in the understanding of dates and events, there are useful timelines at the beginning of each chapter in this section. Naismith's particular strengths in English history are clear here with his clear descriptions of Mercian, Northumbrian, and Wessex histories, which in turn makes discussions of the rest of Britain stand out as they feel less thorough. For instance, his discussion of the Corcu Réti and Dál Riata seem to be based on a misunderstanding. He claims that Corcu Réti was a kindred "dominant in Dál Riata", but in fact Corcu Réti was an earlier synonym for Dál Riata, both terms signifying descendants of Riata (DUMVILLE, 2002, 186). Later on, his discussion of the Kingdom of Alba uses rather confusing terminology for language, referring to what the inhabitants of Alba spoke as both Irish and Gaelic (p. 240). This is a complex topic, perhaps deserving of more analysis for the student who may feel adrift with

complexities of language terminology. Indeed, the further use of the term "Albanian/Scottish" (p. 248) does little to clear up the issues surrounding how historians refer to those in Northern Britain in the ninth century and later. His discussions on Wales are brief, but they provide a decent overview of the historical developments of the Welsh kingdoms, with a good examination of the poem *Y Gododdin* (p. 170-171). In addition, his section on the Vikings succeed in discussing the problematic terminology used to describe these peoples, as well as the difficulties in understanding the nature of Scandinavian hostilities and settlements in Britain (p. 221-231). This nuanced discussion would have been welcome with regards to "Anglo-Saxon". There are repetitive sections throughout, largely where Naismith discusses Bede and Gildas; one could argue that a more dedicated section on these authors would serve the book better, but for students this repetition may be useful for internalising knowledge of these authors and texts.

The third and last section of the book, titled "Living in Early Medieval Britain" is an extensive section covering many subjects broadly within sociocultural, religious, and linguistic history: 11) "Kingship in Action," 12) "Building a Christian Society," 13) "Maintaining Belief: The Church as an Institution," 14) "Family, Friend, Lord, Slave: The Basis of Society," 15) "Land, People and Settlement," 16) "Getting and Giving: Acts and Settings of Exchange," 17) "Language and Communication," and 18) "As Far as the Cold Waves Reach': Conclusion." These chapters deal with subjects that, like the first part of this book, are nuanced and complex which introduces a challenge in presentation to students. The discussion on kingship is very condensed, centring largely on English kingship with King Alfred of Wessex as a case study, with a smaller discussion of Welsh kingship. However, Dálriatan, Pictish, and Scottish kingship feature very little in the discussion. Some aspects of kingship even within an English context are not mentioned, such as the complexity of kingly succession and the *ætheling*. In addition, this would have been a useful connection back to his earlier discussion of genealogies (p. 98) in how kings' power is often bolstered through descent, whether real or created. Alfred presents a useful paradigm for kingship but may also be an atypical example. Nevertheless, Alfred's reign does pose a useful crux around which to frame a discussion of the importance of texts, traditions, and royal propaganda. His two chapters on Christianity do highlight the intricate history of conversion and the Church as an institution in Britain. These chapters are perhaps two of the most extensive and detailed

chapters in the book. Naismith's case study "Conversion and Burial" (p. 291-294) presents several examples of burials, but confusingly St Cuthbert's tomb is the first example given, which while it is an excellent example of the use of grave-goods in a Christian context, it does not represent the best example of a "conversion" grave. Sutton Hoo and PrITTLEWELL, on the other hand, have been useful reminders that "Christian" and "Pagan" grave goods cannot be used to determine the religious affiliation of the individual buried. Thus, more discussion of these burials is needed in order to present the nuances of early medieval burials. His discussion of monasticism has a welcome mention of the double monasteries and the power of abbesses like St Æthelthryth. However, the statement that there were no female-led communities amongst the other peoples in Britain aside from the English and Welsh could have been tempered with a statement that we simply have no evidence. Nevertheless, considering that there were female-run communities in Ireland, it would not be unusual for such communities to exist among the Dál Riata and the Picts. There is of course the legend of Darludach, the successor to St Brigit and about whom there is a note in the Pictish king-lists that she went in exile to the Picts and was the abbess of Abernethy, founded by King Nechtan (EVANS, 2008a, 197-198; 200). Declarative statements that certain things did not exist in early medieval Europe are often counterproductive, and it is useful for students to be presented with statements that in fact the lack of evidence does not mean that such a thing in the past was in-existent. Naismith also offers a good overview of St Columba, an Irish saint but whose foundation in Iona, now Western Scotland, was pivotal for the development of Christianity in Northern Britain (p. 320-325). He notes that Columba may not have been born a Christian because later Irish sources state that Columba was named Crimthann at birth (p. 321 - 322). However, this is speculation based on a comment by Richard Sharpe in his translation of the Life of St Columba (SHARPE, 1995, 10; 242-243).

Naismith's chapter on slavery and societal structure is perhaps too condensed for the subjects it covers: lordship, slavery, societal structures, women, sexuality, and law. Slavery is a complex topic, and one questions how it is depicted in this textbook. Naismith states: "Enslavement took many forms, and although deprivation of personal liberty was a constant, not all slaves underwent such physically harsh treatment. Some who had been trafficked from their home might gain respect as valuable members of their new society (p. 335)." However, his subsequent

anecdotes of enslaved persons do not accurately reflect this argument. He notes that St Findan of Rheinau, who escaped slavery, may have been well-treated if he did not escape. Furthermore, two other anecdotes about enslaved persons, the former being one who was saved from punishment and conviction of a crime by their master and the second of a woman who was only shackled to prevent escape or being taken by a former master in fact represent a harsh reality: enslaved persons were considered valuable property, not persons. It is also unfortunate that women in early medieval Britain do not have their own chapter but rather simply a section in this chapter and it focusses solely on English women (p. 339- 344). Pictish matrilineity is, for instance, a subject of much debate in the scholarship (WOOLF, 1998; EVANS, 2008b). More recently, some notable female burials have been identified in Scotland (MALDONADO, 2013, 9). Sexuality is a welcome inclusion into any textbook, although this is more of a general overview here. Law is a very broad topic and is referred to in more general terms with more of a focus on England. Even briefly it may have been worth mentioning the *Senchas Már* or the *Cáin Adomnáin* here.

His chapter on the landscape and settlement is a good overview and has welcome additions of maps and excerpts from charter boundaries throughout. Naismith did not cite Susan Oosthuizen's *The Anglo-Saxon Fenland* (2017) which is perhaps one of the most thorough and most recent discussions of settlement and land exploitation in Southern Britain, but perhaps it could be included in a later edition.

Naismith's chapter on exchange and money is understandably very detailed, given his own background with early English numismatic history. Students will be pleased to see good quality black-and-white photos of English coins from various periods (p. 387-388), demonstrating the different iconographies and styles. Although this may have exceeded how much space could be dedicated to the subject, but a brief comment on iconography of kings and Christianity might be helpful for students here. Anna Gannon's work on iconography (GANNON, 2003) would be useful to cite here.

The last chapter before the conclusion examines languages in Britain: Latin, vernaculars, writing systems, and personal and place-names. This is a very helpful discussion for any student who may be interested in exploring other early medieval insular languages. This chapter stands out in how it balances examinations of Latin, Old English, Old Irish, the Brittonic languages of early Welsh and Pictish, and Old Norse. What may

have been interesting would be a reference to the pre-Christian English names like Wodnesburh, highlighting the layers of place-names in the landscape that persist even through conversion. The key texts for this chapter cover some of the most comprehensive texts for this area, although what is not cited is Damian McManus' *A Guide to Ogham* (1991), an important text for Ogham.

The conclusion is interesting as it discusses Britain post-1000 and how it was changing. This is useful for students to see that periodisation is largely a historiographical construct: for the average person living circa 1066 their lives would not have been drastically different post-Norman Conquest. The conclusion also gives an overview of the historical changes from Britain in 500 to Britain in 1000, but also notes that it is far too complex to quantify in a single volume.

Naismith offers a glossary at the back, which is always key for a textbook although some terms are excluded: for instance, he includes some kingdoms like Mercia but not East Anglia or Kent. His "Further Reading" sections is variable. Some chapters and sub-chapters have extensive reading lists like the chapters in part 2 while others are very truncated such as the sub-section on women which only has four sources total. As mentioned above, certain key texts do not appear in this book. Some others that would be extremely useful for the undergraduate medieval history student are Kathleen Davis' *Periodization and Sovereignty: How Ideas of Feudalism and Secularization Govern the Politics of Time* (2008), Erin Sebo's *In Enigmate: The history of a riddle, 400 - 1500* (2008), and T. M. Charles-Edwards' *Early Irish and Welsh Kinship* (1993).

One final quibble with this book is the use of footnotes: there are a few scattered throughout, citing primary sources and secondary literature alike. However, it is unclear what the criteria for a footnote is in this book, as most of the information that is clearly taken from other sources goes uncited.

Overall, this textbook does provide students with a good access to textual excerpts and narrative history. Certainly, some areas shine such as the historical narratives of Britain in the second part of the book or the numismatic and linguistic histories of Britain. However, the book does tend to reaffirm much of the status quo in historiography: more focus on "male" history while socio-cultural history tends to have less depth. English history dominates the book while Welsh and the histories of Dál Riata, Pictland, and Alba have varying levels of emphasis. Thus, it can be a useful textbook but with the caveats that it skews heavily

towards more "traditional" history and a student may have to be directed elsewhere for overviews on ideology, the misuse of the past, women's history, and the histories of Wales and Scotland.

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